BEACON
23
ONE: LITTLE NOISES
HUGH HOWEY

SHOUT
SHARE
IT

Annotation

For centuries, men and women have manned lighthouses to ensure the safe passage of ships. It is a lonely job, and a thankless one for the most part. Until something goes wrong. Until a ship is in distress.

In the 23rd century, this job has moved into outer space. A network of beacons allows ships to travel across the Milky Way at many times the speed of light. These beacons are built to be robust. They never break down. They never fail.

At least, they aren’t supposed to.

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Beacon 23
PART ONE: LITTLE NOISES
by Hugh Howey

• 1 •

They don't prepare you for the little noises. They put you in a centrifuge until you pass out, ride you up and down parabolic curves until you puke your stomach lining, poke you with needles until you know what an addict feels like, and make you learn three fields of physics and get a medical degree while training for triathlons.

But they don't tell you what it's like to live with the clacks and squeaks and little, distant beeps. Or how the deadness of space for light years around can be felt like a great, crushing weight. That silence seems to build and build, like the darkness I saw once in a cave in West Virginia. Darkness you can chew. Darkness you can feel for miles all around you. Darkness you're not sure you'll ever crawl out of.

The silence of deep space is just like that. Which makes the little whirring gizmos in my beacon a nightmarish clatter of nerve-jangling assholes. I hate every one of them. Everything that moves in this place. Every little gear and piezo buzzer and alarm. It's not just that they're discordant, it's that they're unpredictable. And so I spend the gaps in between bracing for them, waiting for them, expecting them. As soon as you loosen up, they hit. Little pricks on my eardrums.

They are devilish bastards, too. Like deer, they seem to know when you hunt for them. I crawl through the duct-like work spaces of my beacon with a flashlight, wire snips, duct tape, and bits of foam. I stalk the fuckers. I set traps, thinking some of the noises are scurrying away from me, that they must be little critters that came on board with a batch of poorly sterilized fruit.

They seem to hear me coming, and the beeps and buzzes go quiet. Scarce as bucks on the first day of open season. As soon as I crawl out, there they are again, making a racket. Like that same ten-point buck, the day after season, standing in your yard, chewing your tulips with that idiot look on his face, like, "Whut?"

Yeah, I'm coming for you motherfuckers. I've set traps. Microphones with recorders to nail down the locations of the beeps. Squirts of oil everywhere for the squeaks. And every kind of cockroach hotel made for the clickety-clack, moving little noises.

NASA would be proud of my efforts and ingenuity, right? All that training. For this. But what else am I gonna do? I'm the meaty center of this rusted metal popsicle out here on the edge of space. I'm here because they ain't made a computer yet that won't do something stupid one time out of a hundred trillion. Seems like good odds, but when computers are doing trillions of things a day, that means a whole lot of stupid. And I'm supposed to be smart enough to sort them

out.

Most of my time not spent hunting down squeaks and creaks is spent up in the lighthouse. I know that's not what we're supposed to call it, but c'mon. At the long end of a tunnel that stands off the rest of the beacon, there's a small cavity with portholes on all sides. The gravity wave broadcaster is in this puppy. It's the business end of the beacon; everything else is just here to make sure it stays running, and that includes me.

The long arm sets the GWB apart from the rest of the beacon, because its waves fall off with the fourth power of distance. Those waves will scramble the wires of anything within a five or six meter radius, including mine. You're not supposed to spend too much time around the GWB according to NASA, because it does funny things to your head, which is another way of saying it gives you a nice mellow, but what do they expect us to do when they post us two years at a time out here in the middle of nowhere? I doubt I'm the only one who sits with my back to the machine, letting it soothe my head like a straight-up whiskey, while I gaze out at the dull gray stones of the asteroid field that makes an awful mess of astral navigation.

Across from the GWB, and right above the best porthole for watching the asteroids twirl in space, there's a faded picture that some former resident put up, which is why I suspect I'm not the only one who sits here. In the picture, a man in slickers is standing outside an actual, Earth-based lighthouse. A wave taller than the lighthouse looms behind him, must be twenty meters high. The wave is slamming into this tapered pillar of stone, and you figure it's the last shot of the lighthouse *or* the man, that this tidal wave utterly destroys both of them in the next fraction of a second, and that the man is smoking his pipe and squinting up at what must be a drone with a camera or something, like he's thinking, "That's the most curious thing," and has no idea his ticket is about to get punched from behind.

I've spent more time looking at this poster than I have at the field of stars and rocks out the window. For a while, I assumed it was computer generated. You can never tell with these things. Sometimes the real looks fake, especially when you've looked at the fake for so long. But why would anyone hang up some CGI with such reverence? The paper is slick, not like the thermal crap we print on here. And there's not a crease on it, which means it was brought flat packed or in a courier roll. Either way, someone took some care in getting it here. So I assume the damn thing is real. I assume this guy is real, that he's having his last toke there at the end of his tiny world and his tiny life.

I get a good gwib buzz staring at this photo, sometimes for hours, while I wait for a CPU to need a reboot or some ship to come out of

hyper and ask for directions or give me some news of the war. This man is taking a hellstrom with a shrug and a deep drag like he's such a boss. Such a cool customer. Meanwhile, I lose my shit over some distant, infernal clicking sound. That lighthouse keeper was my hero for the longest time. Until I learned more about that photo.

Turns out there's a dozen variants of similar shots. And yeah, they're all real. I sent a research request to Houston after I couldn't turn up anything in the archives, and I could easily imagine the conversation on their side, because I'd had my share of them when I worked ground support during training:

Chief of Ops: "I'm sorry, 23 wants to know what?"

"Uh, sir, he wants the history behind a particular photo. And no, it's not a spectral chart. Or anything… uh, scientific. It's… well, here. He sent a digital cap."

Long pause while the Chief stares at a handlet.

"You've gotta be fucking kidding."

"Nossir."

"And he used a *research request* on this? Has he got any left?"

"First one he's ever used, sir. Guy has a clean record. Served on the front before he got his red badge and was reassigned."

"Lemme guess: blow to the head?"

"Nossir. Had his guts shot out by a Lord. Was given a quiet beacon out on the edge of Sector Eight."

"So he's probably hugging that GWB like she's some dollar hooker at the end of two tours."

"Probably, sir. Would be my guess."

"Ah, fuckit. The boy's a war hero for crissakes. See what you can dig up."

Of course, that's probably *not* how it went down. Some lackey most likely got the request, Binged that shit himself instead of sending it to the actual research department, and fired off eight pages of search page results and their targets back to me. Probably took him two seconds. I got the response three months later from a tug grabbing an ore load that didn't belong to them. Said they had something for me, then went into the belt and took billions of dollars of something for themselves. It's a crazy world out here on the edge, but enough shrugging and looking the other way, and it all seems to sort itself out.

And as it turns out, my goddamn hero-of-the-mist lighthouse keeper was just as batshit scared as the rest of us. The whole history of that photo is well documented. The shot was from a manned helo, of all things. While the photog was grabbing the pic, the onboard pilot was waving his fool head off for the old lighthouse keeper to *move*. *Move!* Supposedly, just after he got his picture taken looking like a complete granite badass, the old man was shitting his drawers,

dropping his stogie, and leaping through the lighthouse door just in time to save his ass from getting washed away.

This is the thing about being a hero: *It's all about when you get your picture taken*. I'll be a hero for the rest of my life, I suppose. So long as I spend it in here with the door shut, hugging my knees, and staying away from any more cameras.

• 2 •

My twelfth level of hell consists of a small steel marble dropped from a height of two inches, smacking a solid block of concrete.

That's what it sounds like anyway: the worst of the little random clicks that only come out when I'm in my bunk, trying to sleep. This one particular noise is like a cockroach. Not that it sounds like one—that's the other noises—just that it only scurries out to play when I shut the interior lights off, and then it disappears when I'm up and moving about. My footsteps literally scare it away. Explain that to me.

NASA says everything in the beacon is necessary, that if I'm hearing a noise, it's just a gizmo doing its job. The subtext here is for me to shut the hell up and just do *my* job. Heh. Maybe me and every other beacon operator drive Houston nuts with all our squeaks and requests. Maybe this is them getting back at us. I can see the scene down in Mission Control right now: a man in a white shirt and black tie checking my vitals on a readout, his chief inquiring if I've hit REM sleep yet.

"Affirmative, sir. Sleeping like a baby."

"Excellent. Queue up the machine that goes *bing!"*

Or the machine that sounds like a steel marble impacting concrete.

This little jewel in my trillion-dollar watchwork beacon is giving me fits while I spin around in my bunk, looking for a pocket of cool and a period of silence. And this is when a different sound reminds me that sounds can be *truly* bad. Not just annoying, not just discordant symphony to my carefully orchestrated silence, but a sound like the *old* sounds, like plasma fire and shard grenades, like suicidal orders from men too slow, old, and wise to wear a jocksuit, noises like bombs going off and air raid sirens. *Those* kinds of noises.

I know what it is the moment I hear it: complete GWB failure. The beacon going dark. I know, because I've run through the simulator beacon in the Mojave a bajillion times. I know, because those simulations still give me nightmares—nightmares with gray-bearded faces peering in through flimsy fake portholes while I try to figure out how they fucked me over this time.

We used to have a joke at SIMCOM: NASA screws its 'nauts up the bum when we're Earthside, because in space, no one can hear you squeal.

GWB failures don't happen. The redundancies have redundancies have redundancies. It gets all incestuous up in beacon 23's innards, I'm telling you. In order for something to go wrong, an alarm has to be out, and a backup alarm, and two different modules built to do the

same thing and checked every few seconds to make sure they're capable of doing that thing. All the chips and software are self-healing and able to reboot on their own. You could set off an EMP in this bastard, and she'd be back up in two shakes. What you'd need is two dozen random breakdowns to strike at once, plus a host of other coincidences too mind-boggling to consider.

Some brainiac at NASA calculated the odds once. They were very, very small. Then again, as of last week, there were 1,527 GALSAT beacons in operation across the Milky Way. So I guess the odds of something happening to *someone* keep going up. Especially as the beacons get older. And now I guess that someone is me.

With this little snafu, the noises are suddenly *hoping* to be found. They're calling for me, little alarms everywhere. I scramble from my bunk and climb the ladder to the command module in my boxers. The first thing I check is the power load, and all is kosher. I check the nav gyros and the starfield scanners, and the beacon's not confused about where we are. I check the quantum tunneler, but there aren't any messages. While I'm there, I put in a quick note to Houston, even though I'm sure they're getting an auto relay with error codes out the wazoo.

Outage. 0314 GST.

They'll get this minutes after the beacon has already warned them, but at least they'll know I'm up. Their man on the scene. The chewy meat center of their big ol' spacesicle.

I grab the edge of the tunnel that leads to the lighthouse and launch myself down the chute toward the GWB in the distance. Done this so many times, I just have to brush a finger against the wall to course-correct. Red lights pulse up and down the length of the chute. There's an alarm screaming ahead.

Spreading my arms, fingertips squeaking across metal to slow my arrival, I grab the last rung and swing into the lighthouse.

The GWB is cool to the touch. That means she's not emitting her safe passage corridor to transiting ships. Nor is she being her usual, soothing self. It's like a favorite lager has transmuted into an energy drink. "You're starting to stress me out," I tell her, pulling the hexagonal panels off one by one.

I set them aside and study the smooth dome beneath. There's a clacking somewhere, like a loose bolt tumbling into a recess. I check all the thumbscrews and don't see any missing. More of the random noises. At the base of the GWB, I check all the wires and connections. The first things we're trained to try are the same things I assume we would try without the trillion-dollar education. I begin unplugging everything. Count to ten. Plug it all back in. Make sure everything's

seated properly.

In the back of my mind, while doing all this, I'm thinking of shipping schedules. There's a clock on the wall, a brass one that has to be wound once a week or it'll stop working. Anything on batteries up here or with a CPU is toast with the GWB on. I stopped winding the clock when the small sounds started driving me crazy, because I couldn't take the ticking anymore. My guess is it's been five minutes since my note to NASA, so probably right around 0320. There's an 0330 cargo out of Orion, bound for Vega, if I remember correctly. Crew of eight, probably, on a ship that size. And then the beacon seems to spin around me and I have to brace myself as I think about the *Varsk*. An 0342 luxury line transit. What does she carry, five thousand passengers? Plus crew?

I leave the panels off the GWB and thrust down the chute again. Terrible trajectory. I crash into one wall, my bare shoulder skidding, squeaking, burning, which causes me to careen and tumble and bang my head and my shin before I arrest myself. "Calm down," I tell myself. "One thing at a time." This is what I used to say out loud when I was a soldier, when doing things too fast could get your guts blown out.

Pulling myself down the chute's handholds, I pick up momentum again in the zero-gee. When I hit the edge of gravity leaking from the beacon proper, I turn and float feet-first, falling the last meter and landing in a crouch.

The power station is two flights down. I skid down the ladder, zipping past the living quarters, palms burning. The clang of bare feet on metal grate. The main relays are nasty cusses, large T-bars with rubber grips. The best way to throw them is to do it with your legs. I squat down, get a shoulder braced under one side of the T, and strain upward, spinning the bar ninety degrees, while unseen contacts on the other end of the bar lose connection.

I repeat this with the other relay. There's a deep *thump* from the cut power, and the room goes full blackout. Emergency battery lights flicker on as their photosensors startle at the void. I count to ten again, letting the power drain from the system, all those little capacitors that can keep a memory of whatever's ailing the processors. I want them to forget. When they power back up from a hard reset, they should restore themselves to factory conditions. Little newborn babes.

The relays are harder to turn back on, now that the T-bars are vertical. I brace a foot on a railing and give a good tug. There's a twinge of pain in my belly from being a hero once. I remember a SIMCOM test years ago, making sure I could turn these relays ten times, back and forth, and thinking my guts were going to spill out of

my knotted scars. I remember telling the graybeards after: “Nope, feels great. Never better.” Then pissing red for a week.

The lights come back with the first relay. I throw the second. There are no alarms. Everything is rebooting, circuits sorting themselves according to protein-based memories, software reloading from hardwired references. I’m mostly upset at my sleep having been disturbed, and I’m not looking forward to the paperwork and error logs I’ll need to wade through.

Up the ladder now, sweating, feet hurting, wishing I’d put on my boots, I check the time. 0326. Two minutes or so for a full reboot. Leaves two minutes of margin for the Orion cargo. Cutting it damn close. I’m thinking about the cargo bound for Vega, and the mess a wreck like that will make for the asteroid field. But it’s the *Varsk* that’s haunting me. There are five thousand souls watching in-flights right now with their earbuds in. Laughing at that comedy. Ordering another gin and tonic. Snoring. Fumbling for their seats in the darkness as they return from the head. A baby crying, someone sneezing and scaring the hell out of everyone else with that crowded, recycled air.

There’s a chime from the QT. A message from Houston. I go over to the screen to read it, but before I get there, the alarms go off again. Screaming at me. The red lights, throbbing. Full GWB failure a *second time.* After a hard reboot.

The impossibility of this is banging against my skull as I stare at the words on the QT, the message from NASA. I blink, but they don’t go away. I’d hoped for some solution, something like help up in this joint. Instead, all I get from them is:

What outage?

• 3 •

99% of my time working with NASA is spent bitching that I know more than they do. The other 1% of my time is spent trembling, pissing myself, realizing I might actually be right. Now is one of those latter times. Houston should know everything wrong with my beacon, *especially the fact that it is no longer doing the beacon-like things beacons are built for*.

Instead, I've got someone sipping tepid coffee down in the land of women and pizza checking his readouts and telling me there's nothing amiss. *When I goddamn know something is amiss*. The GWB was cool to the touch. And the alarms are going off again.

I type another quick text. The QT works with entangled particles, and they're destroyed as they're used, but I don't care about budgets right now so much as not wasting time with whatever dweeb can't do his job. I also very purposefully employ the caps button, because they can, in this way, hear us scream in space:

> GWB FULL FAIL. ZERO TRANSMIT. CARGO AND LUX LINER IN TRANSIT. HARD REBOOT NO GOOD.

Get on the job, Houston.

I try to imagine people down on Earth stiffening at their consoles, rubbing the sleep from their eyes, and fixing all of this for me remotely, but I know there's not even enough time for another reboot, not before the transit. Not sure why, but I launch back down the barrel to the GWB. Maybe just to watch, to hope nothing happens, to see the complete lack of wake as a ship passes by at twenty times the speed of light.

The GWB is still lifeless and cold when I arrive, the alarms still flashing and blaring. I turn to the porthole facing the asteroid belt—and a new star blooms into a brief and ugly existence. A blinding flash of light. Streaks of molten metal like meteors. An expanding cloud of titanium tinsel. Asteroids crashing and tumbling and knocking into one another, cleaving into smaller hunks of rock. An immense amount of destruction, all without making a sound, a macabre ballet and light show.

A large chunk of the cargo vessel flips end over end, twisted like taffy, great black gouges down the side, and everywhere are the scraps of bright red and blue and gray containers, all their contents spilling into the vacuum of space, much of it pulverized beyond recognition.

It all happens in an instant. None of the destruction is there one moment—just quietude and the mingling of hippo-like rocks—and

then chaos and burning and death and space litter. This is what it looks like when a billion-ton spacecraft goes from FTL to slamming into a rock the size of a small county. When the beacon's GWB went out, it was like the street sign before a sharp curve had been removed, the one that warns of the approaching cliff. I think of the eight crewmembers dead. Eight is the number of men in a special battalions squad. We don't normally lose them quite this fast. Oftentimes, one will crawl away and die a slow and lonely death on the edge of space. But no one is crawling away from the disaster beyond my porthole. And five thousand more lives are inbound at twenty times the speed of light.

• 4 •

The archives deep in the heart of beacon 23 house practically every novel ever written. A random trip through the database is an exercise in frustration, as for every one novel I would enjoy, there are roughly three billion I can't get through, and no way of telling the two types apart other than a miserable chapter or two.

Which is why I spend more time reading through the complete Wiki, circa 2245, not updated in several decades, but close enough for solar nukes and frag grenades.

My curiosity over the picture of the lighthouse keeper and the tidal wave led me deep into the Wiki searching for answers, to no avail. But before I reached out to NASA with a research request, I stumbled upon an article that beggared belief. This article comes to mind as I watch the remnants of an interplanetary cargo vessel disperse itself across the cosmos. It comes to mind as I see what looks like two smaller pirate-class cargo vessels moving out there among the lifeless rocks and the tinsel of torn hull. The article was about an old profession long since lost. Or so the Wiki thought.

In the days of sea-bound ships, when hulls were made to keep water rather than vacuum out, and hazards to navigation were submerged rocks, not the floating-in-space kind, there was a dishonest profession of men known as *wreckers.*

I wouldn't have believed it, were it not right there in the Wiki, but wreckers did just as described: they wrecked ships for a living. A brutal, murderous living.

I increased the zoom on the porthole and watched the flame of thrusters and the white puff of attitude controllers as the two black-painted cargo ships scooted from cargo container to cargo container. And the extreme coincidence of my GWB failure seemed to slide away. This was a lighthouse I was standing in, and lighthouses were not always appreciated.

Four or five centuries ago, a lighthouse would go up and down long before it went around and around. That is, some of the lighthouse would get built during the day, and then at night, many of those same stones would disappear. This would go on for months, until the builders posted guards and gave out beatings to the saboteurs. Lighthouses, you see, were bad business for the men who relied on wrecks for a living.

Wrecking probably starts with the sudden and unexpected bounty of one big catastrophe at sea. Lucky and enterprising salvagers sell the spoils that wash up beyond the reef. Before too long, clever and desperate men begin wishing for the next great crash. And so they

proceed to make it happen.

In small boats, they offer to guide visiting ships through the reefs, only to take their shallow drafts over rocks that mean doom for the bigger ships. Or they light fires to show harbors that don't exist. They forge sea charts. They rig chains across channels. The lives lost are of less consequence than the spoils gained. In every wreck and crash, there is some unseen man rubbing his hands with thoughts of tidy profits.

Lighthouses, then, are not to be tolerated. NASA *hates* it when we refer to beacons as lighthouses. Maybe they didn't want to give any deplorable types any deplorable ideas.

In the distance, beyond my beacon, in a realm of space where I can go weeks without seeing another living soul, I watch some such deplorable people go about their business, and I'm powerless to stop them. I'm also reminded that there's no such thing as coincidences. My little lighthouse on the edge of sector eight was taken down, brick by brick.

I shove away from the porthole and down the barrel again, needing to tell Houston. "We have a problem," I hear myself thinking. But no one writes that anymore. We *only* get in touch with Houston when we have a problem. No point in wasting entangled particles on the redundant.

Sabotage, I type into the QT. There's no all-caps. Watching the cargo explode into countless pieces, and the equivalent of a squad die at the hands of pirates, has left me numb. *Reboot unsuccessful.* I backspace and change to *Reboot failed. Please advise.*

I hit "send." Then "confirm." And finally: "Yes, I'm sure."

The machine beeps. At least it's a good little noise. So much of the beacon must've been fucked with all at once, including the QT error reporting to Houston. And this is when the big realization hits me like a sack of bricks. This is when my months-long torment with the little sounds makes me feel less insane. In the minutes since I realized my beacon has been hacked by wreckers, I've assumed it was done from the outside. Some way of getting around NASA's supposedly iron-tight security measures. Some brilliant hack.

Then I think about a trade I made with some unseemly characters a while back. I think about the other ship that dropped off my research request and then proceeded to steal ore from the belt. In the days of wooden ships, pests came on with boxes of fruit. Cockroaches hatched from eggs laid in cardboard. Rats found their way into the bilges, where they had more rats. What the fuck have I done?

I think of the sounds that seemed to scurry out of the way whenever I got near. And suddenly, I'm not alone in the beacon. I scan the walls of knobs and displays. There are pipes running everywhere

around me, bundles of wire drooping from the ceiling, open panels from recent projects that allow me to peek into the innards of NASA's little creation. And the creepy-crawlies are everywhere. Watching me. Little metal insects that don't get caught in my traps, because they're the wrong kind of traps.

I check the time. Ten minutes before the *Varsk* passes these waters. Waters. Taking the imagery too far. Or maybe it's because I feel like I'm drowning. Back in the war zone. A medal pinned to my chest in a hospital, pinned there for saving a fraction of the lives that are about to be lost because of me. There won't be any photos of this. Just headlines of an accident. Five thousand dead. And I'm still a hero, smoking my pipe, that awful wave reaching up behind me.

The QT beeps with a message from NASA.

Sitrep

"Situation report?" I ask the void. I say to the creepy crawlies, to no one in particular: "Situation normal, motherfuckers. I screwed up."

I bang my palm on the screen closest to me, and the green phosphorous readout wavers for a moment. Wreckers. I'll be lucky if they don't kill me. Lucky they haven't already. I need to get a message off to NASA to warn them of future hacks like this. Social hacks are always the easiest way in, because people like me are the weakest link. I don't worry about the QT costs. I hammer out a quick explanation, a best guess:

> Took on illicit delivery. Bugs in the shipment, metal kind. Some kind of hack. Took down all the systems at once. Check other beacons. Look into history of Wreckers. Pirates taking cargo. Not sure if they'll fix the beacon. Lux liner with 5k pop heading this way. Reboot may have worked, but they just shut GWB off as soon as it came on.

I hit send. I confirm. But before I can say "I'm sure," I think about my explanation. Is it right? There was definitely a delay before the alarms came on, like maybe the reboot worked but then the GWB was shut down again. Does that mean the critters are still here, watching me? Is there anything I can do about them?

Staring down the barrel toward the lighthouse, I think of a disinfectant. I think of war, where some lives are lost in order to save others. Where even eradication is a thing we'll consider. Where the greatest evils become the greater goods.

My hand is on my bare stomach, rubbing cords of knotted flesh, the raised welts of scars that tell a story. I stop this. There's no time for that. No time but to act.

• 5 •

There's a run of wire overhead to send power out to the red docking target, the big red O that guides in supply ships. I grab this and give it a good yank, pulling it free from the velcro harness. Finding my snips, I hack one end of the wire and tug enough from the chases for what I'll need. I grab a wrench and boost myself down the barrel toward the lighthouse.

The GWB is still exposed, its panels lying on the floor. The clock on the wall is showing me the wrong time. I almost wish it was wound, wouldn't mind the ticking. I'd love to know how much time I have left.

I cut the power feeds to the GWB. The voltage for it and the docking lamp are both 220, if I remember the schematics right. Been a while since I had to know this shit. With the wrench, I loosen the six bolts that hold the gravity wave broadcaster dome to its mount, like removing the light fixture from a lighthouse. I get it free and leave the wrench behind. Cradling the GWB like a beach ball, I move slowly down the barrel toward the control room, turning before gravity takes over, landing in a crouch.

I leave the GWB in the middle of the floor, near the coil of wire. Down the ladder and to the fuses again. I put my back into them, and they turn a little more easily, maybe from being worked back and forth already. When the power goes out, I head for the ladder, not waiting for my eyes to adjust or the emergency lighting to come on. Bump and fumble, I'm up two rungs before I can see again. A humming somewhere of power winding down in a pump or a spinning fan. The chiming of my bare feet on the rungs.

I strip the ends of the docking target power cord and splice them to the GWB. The creepy crawlies are watching me. Little metal legs twitching. Infrared cameras curious. Poised by the beacon's relays and electrical inputs with their little instructions to wreck shit. I tell myself this, even though I don't know. Even though I suspect I'm just a little bit crazy. Even though it might all be in my head.

Three minutes. The splices are shit, but should relay enough power. Enough to fry batteries and electronics for a few-meter radius. Any chips not built to handle it. Anything that can't do a hard factory reset.

Back to the power relays, sliding down the ladder with hands and feet on the outer rails. Bruising my heel on impact. Limping over in the glow of the emergency lights. I throw the breakers, imagining old men with gray beards peering in at me through the portholes, watching this idiot ruin their simulation, making notes on their

clipboards, shaking their weary heads.

First breaker makes contact, and the lights come on. Then the next. There's a pause while the GWB warms up, then a series of pops and hisses as it fries everything nearby. No time for alarms. Darkness descends. A flickering, unsteady, then absolute darkness.

Back up the ladder now, this time with no lights. Nothing. Just my labored breaths, the slap of palms on the ladder, the ticking of an internal clock, the thought of all those people in that liner, and all the other people I couldn't save. Corpses. Bones. Grinning skeletons. Friends and brothers in combat suits, that befuddled look on faces just before the lights go out inside, even though they know what's happening, even though they've expected it for years since boot camp, even though they've seen it before with their buddies, but the last part that goes is the little sliver of hope that thought you'd get through this mess, that thought you'd live to see the other side, that it'd be your name on the war memoir, on the cover, not in the dedication.

I find the GWB by crawling around and groping in the pitch black. Find the wires. Yank them free. Then crawl back to the ladder to do it all again. Exhausted. Like PT. Forced marches. Don't get enough exercise in this place. My stomach hurts, but it's probably just a stabbing recollection. A painful memory. Nothing more.

I throw the breakers for what I hope is the last time. Another factory reset, all those chips rebuilding themselves, software going back to primitive states, power flickering on, the beeps and whirrings and hissings that are *supposed* to be there.

I wonder if the wreckers anticipated this, if their little bugs have self-healing CPUs. They do or they don't. No time to waste dwelling on it. I'm back up the ladder, my arms quivering, my legs numb, wishing I'd killed the gravity before I started this. That would've been smart. A good soldier would've thought of that.

I grab the GWB and pull myself down the barrel. In the lighthouse, the porthole is still zoomed in on the debris. Motion and activity out there, the motherfuckers. I only tighten two of the bolts before I grab the wires. No time to go back and shut off the power while I juice it up, so I decide to splice it on hot. Negative first, careful not to touch the wires together or to the same metal surface. Then the positive, sparks flying right as they touch, but settling as I wind the copper ends tight to each other.

I sit back. Listen for the hum. Place a hand on the dome. Is it getting warm, or is that my heat? My sweaty palm?

There is no clock. But I know the time is short, and that the only way I'll know if it didn't work is a sudden bloom of light that fills the portholes, another great wreck to sift through, this time full of bodies and all their valuables. I think of the wreckers of old who sorted

through wooden chests and gathered planks and coils of rope while corpses washed up on the beach. I see men in zero-gee pulling the boots off the drowned. Digging through pockets. Yanking gold chains from necks. Sucking on lifeless fingers to loosen rings.

Then I see a scared little soldier sitting in a muddy trench on an alien world, finger on the trigger, just needing to shoot. To shoot. The boys all around are shooting, and they're ending up dead. The best thing I ever did in life was nothing, and I got a medal for it. I was a hero once. And if you look at my picture, that's all I'll ever be.

Minutes pass. Hours. I'm sobbing with relief. Nothing happened. Nothing. The unseen wake left by five thousand squirming souls as they pass me by at twenty times the speed of light. On they go, leaving me here, sobbing. Eighteen more months on this shift, alone, my back to the sea, tending to my little beacon with all its pretty little noises.